

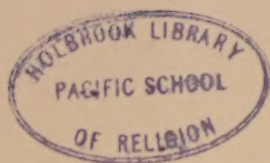
*Rev. O.W. Lucas.*

# HINTS ON PREACHING.

AS SEEN FROM THE PEWS.

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# HINTS ON PREACHING,

*AS SEEN FROM THE PEWS.*

An Address,

DELIVERED AT THE CONGREGATIONAL MINISTERS' MEETING, MONDAY, DECEMBER 10, 1883.

BY  
SAMUEL B. CAPEN, ESQ., 1842-1914.

FURNISHED FOR PUBLICATION AT THE REQUEST OF THE PUBLISHING COMMITTEE OF THE  
CONGREGATIONAL SUNDAY-SCHOOL AND PUBLISHING SOCIETY.

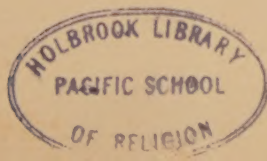


BOSTON:

Congregational Sunday-School and Publishing Society.

CONGREGATIONAL HOUSE, BEACON STREET.

1884.



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## STATEMENT.

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THE following address was prepared and read December 10, 1883, before the Monday meeting of Congregational ministers, in Pilgrim Hall, by request of their Committee of Arrangements. It elicited so deep an interest in the large audience present, and its points were so suggestive of a further consideration, that the author consented, though reluctantly, to the request of a copy for publication by the Theological Committee of the Congregational Sunday-School and Publishing Society. By the authorization of that committee, it is now issued.

M. BLAKE, *Secretary.*





## HINTS ON PREACHING,

AS SEEN FROM THE PEWS.

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When asked by your committee to say something upon this theme, my first feeling was one of amusement at the very thought of performing such a service, and standing in such a place ; but this was followed by one more sober, realizing something, I think, of the importance of the subject. The thought came that I ought to be willing to give any hints upon the manner or character of our preaching as seen from a layman's position, which might, by God's blessing, be in the slightest degree helpful. To preach the gospel is the grandest privilege which ever comes to any man, far grander than angel's or seraph's work. Yea, it was the very work of God in Christ. The *manner* and *method* of such a calling is not, therefore, a matter of indifference.

And I wish to be understood at the very commencement that what I shall say is not to be understood as a criticism. I have too much respect

both for the preachers and their message. The wonder to me is how men can, twice a week for years, come before the same audience, upon the same theme, and that theme one which is disliked by the natural heart, and yet always have something new for our help. I believe it proves two things: First, that the Book from which the truth is drawn is "God made," and not "man made"; otherwise it would have been exhausted long ago. Second, that the men in the ministry, taken as a whole, are superior, intellectually, to those of any other profession or calling. The truths with which they deal, and the atmosphere which they breathe, develop them, broaden them, strengthen their minds as well as expand their souls. There are fewer men in the ministry than in any other calling who can be illustrated by the man who said he was in the employ of the Government. On being pressed as to his special duties, he was found to be a night-watchman, and he said: "It is my duty to do nothing myself, and see that nobody else does nothing."

The first suggestion I would like to make is this: that *many of our preachers overrate, intellectually, the average of their audience.* (The great trouble

in our late war was that the soldiers fired too high, and so only a very small percentage of bullets ever hit anything. The constant caution was "fire lower." I think that should be the order given now to the pulpit, if they would do the best execution. You overrate our intellectual capacity, and also our interest in philosophical and theological questions. When young men and women leave school and the seminary, how many of them mean to follow, in their leisure moments, some course of study. How few ever do it. They find themselves confronted with the most practical questions of how to live. Their life is an intensely practical one; they are dealing with hard facts; they are surrounded by sin in its thousand allurements. What touches them on this practical side is heard and remembered. That which helps them in this conflict, which gives them a grand purpose, something better to live for than the gold which perishes, that they heed. How many sermons are preached which are three quarters metaphysical, or philosophical, or theological; and nine tenths of the audience feel — "I am getting nothing that I want." At last, just at the end, very hurriedly, with an eye on the clock, one or two practical thoughts are given, and the

audience is dismissed. Multitudes go home every Sabbath from the house of God with heavy hearts because a grand opportunity to make a personal appeal has been almost wholly lost. The sermon has missed its object. The proportion ought to have been the other way, and three quarters practical.

Of course, in this criticism I desire not to be understood as saying anything against the preaching of the *doctrines*, or the great *living truths*, of the Bible. These must *always* have their full place. To make my meaning plainer: Take a congregation of one hundred people. Do the children care for the long philosophical argument? No. Do the young men and women? Do the business men, the mechanics, the tired housekeeper, or the aged who have already entered the shadow of the next world? No, none of these. Who, then? Only a few cultivated persons, and those, perhaps, who need the gospel the least. Do we not see the proof of this in the universal interest of adults in the sermons to children? The full answer to this is not that they are interested and sometimes amused. It is because they understand the truth when thus presented. And this is one reason, not the only one, why Moody and Bliss and



Sawyer have such power. They have never studied homiletics, but they talk directly and simply, so that all can understand, and the masses of people that we are so anxious to reach, pass by the churches, and are touched by the truth as they preach it. A minister, this summer, after hearing E. W. Bliss, said, as he left the house: "I have been preaching my *seminary education* for four years, and I am now going home to preach the gospel." The Cooper Institute meetings, which have been held for years, summer and winter, with such grand results, I think prove the point. *You overrate our intellects.*

2. You *underrate the keenness of the perceptions of your hearers.* We are disciplined every day in the stern school of experience. Our business is carried on upon the high-pressure system. It is the age of the steam-engine, the telegraph, and the telephone. Even the smallest business and the humblest calling can hardly fail to catch something of this spirit. This intense keenness, ever on the alert, watchful, wary, makes men, and women too, close judges of character. That is the training we get six days in the week; to *know human nature is a part of our capital.* The average man and



woman can tell very quickly whether a minister believes his own theme, and feels that he has a message from God to deliver. They know the infinite difference between "the man that has something to say, and the man that wants to say something." When I was a delegate, some years ago, at the Brooklyn Council, during the *public* meeting there were some ministers that were talking all the time. When the Council was by itself, they subsided. There was no report, in the latter case, for the *daily press*.

The average man knows now the difference between wheat and chaff, and when he is convinced that a man has the one purpose only to save his soul, that man has gained a great vantage ground in winning him for Christ. Such a man can be bold, and men will respect him for it. I remember, in a great religious interest, a worldly man, who was very intelligent, said to me: "Mr. — preaches so plain that he makes men angry sometimes, but they come back the next night to hear him again." His very boldness made him attractive, and drew men towards him. Men want no diluted rose-water religion. They want something that is positive and real. You can preach anything, if

it is only spoken in *love*, as from Calvary and not from Sinai. Being God's *truth*, and not your *guess*, it shall not fail of its mission. A man that has no backbone ought never to be a minister. "You can provide an unfortunate with false teeth, a false eye, an artificial palate, a wig, a stuffed arm, or a cork-leg; but if he has no backbone you can never get one into him." That same keenness of judgment leads them to see very quickly the difference between that which is essential and that which is not. I think ministers would not have felt complimented to have heard the criticisms which have been made upon the profitless discussion of the past year or two. How often have I heard these words: "O, stop this talk about what is not revealed, and go to work to save men that are dying." At the best it was a question concerning "heathen, idiots, and insane," and the pews have felt that they certainly did not belong to either of these classes. It does not touch us. It is not practical for our need, and whatever is not practical in this busy age is a failure. The age for the dreamer and the speculator in religious truth has passed. A famous preacher tells us that he thought he must preach some sermons in answer to Tyndall.

"Others were answering him, and I thought I must take my chance at him, that I must launch a polished shaft at him. And I did, not one, but many. Coming out of the house one day after one of those sermons, a big-bodied, big-hearted man met me, laid his hand on my shoulder, and said: 'We don't care a continental about that man. Preach Christ crucified, and we shall like it better.' I asked his forgiveness, and since then I have delivered all the scientists to the special care of Jehovah."

3. Do not many of our ministers need more *singleness of purpose*? Do not many "spend their money," or their time, which is the same thing, "for that which is not bread?" It is the age of the "*specialist*." The old-fashioned carpenter who made all parts of a house is a man of the past. His trade is subdivided, and we have the sash-maker, and the blind-maker, and the door-maker, and the floor-layer, etc.: every man for his part. So in medicine: your family physician does not now extract your teeth. You have your oculist and your aurist, etc. The same principle is in all mercantile pursuits. A man to do anything in this world worth the doing, must put his energy all in at one point. How much time did Paul spend at Athens studying

art? I received a letter about two years ago from one of the ablest preachers in this country, who told me, in answer to an invitation I gave him, that he had made up his mind to put more of his time into his pulpit works, and abandon that which was outside. A conversation which I had recently with one of his intimate friends shows that he has kept steadily to his purpose. As a result, he has a morning congregation of fifteen hundred people, and an evening one of different persons, but just as large, and it is because they get something that they go. The lawyer that tries to rise in the world by being a life-insurance agent and a leaser of real estate will be outstripped, in the long-run, by the classmate who masters his own profession. "Stick to your business," said Rothschild, "stick to your brewery, and you may be the great brewer of London. Be a brewer, and a baker, and a merchant, and a manufacturer, and you will soon be in the Gazette." I once heard one of the ablest ministers of our day say that he found the morning newspaper one of the most dangerous things for him. He did not allow himself to look at it till he had done several hours of honest labor in his study. Paul's motto is not yet antiquated: "This one thing I do." *It is all you ought to try to do.*

4. Will you allow me to say that there is quite a prevalent idea that many of the pulpits would have more power if the preachers had more *method*. I have known cases where men wasted their time the first of the week, to be driven at the end almost to distraction, sometimes way into Sabbath morning, in getting through their preparations. Such shiftlessness would ruin any modern business. One of our most popular preachers once told me that he was always very careful to get started early, plan to lay out his work, and get to a certain point by the middle of the week, and then he knew he was all right. My wife can pack twice as much into a trunk as I can, for she knows how to economize the space better. The man that methodically and systematically economizes his time can pack twice as much work into a year. One of the ministers that I know best, and who does grand work in all directions, owes much of his success to his *method*. Why could Garfield, at a few hours' notice, make an exhaustive speech on almost any theme? Carefully accumulating material, methodically arranging it by subject, he was always the master of any occasion. The work of the ministry is too noble to be injured by carelessness. The same *precision* and *method*



which is needed in every mercantile business ought to be yours.

5. A minister to succeed must be a *cheerful man*. I know at least two able men whose ministries in this vicinity have failed largely at this point. I know two others, no abler, perhaps, who, by their sweet, sunny, cheerful spirit, have drawn men towards them. It has been my privilege to have as guests a great many ministers. I always get as many as I can, for they always bring a blessing. We did have one with us some years ago whose presence one of the younger members of the family said "was as good as a funeral." I am not pleading for frivolity; that is unworthy the minister of the gospel. But when a man is so out of sympathy with the young, and the bright all about him, that whenever you see his white necktie coming round the corner, you are reminded of the dyspepsia, — when he gives a fair occasion for the jest that "the world has three classes in it, men, women, and ministers," — then he is making a mistake. Those who have made the most impression upon your life and mine have been the sunny, joyous Christians. When they crossed the threshold of your door, it was like letting in a ray of sunlight. Did the man

whose presence in the prayer-meeting was like an *iceberg*, and whose coming to your house made you shudder as though you had struck a northeast fog, do you any good?

I felt anew the force of this truth a few months since, hearing, on one Sabbath, a glorious sermon showing the progress of Christ's cause, and sending every listener back to his life-work with new courage and hope; and then on the following Sabbath hearing the *wail* of another minister, which would help to paralyze every *Christian* heart, and prevent those that were not Christians from joining a "lost cause." Some ministers always attract large congregations, and some do not. In the truth before us, do we not see one reason? You need not fear to grow old, and that you will pass the "dead line," if you will only keep cheerfully in harmony with all that is bright about you. If Christian ministers want to reach men, and show them the power of the gospel, let them "rejoice evermore, and again I say rejoice," and *do not fear to let your people see it*.

6. No man can succeed as he ought without *enthusiasm* and this is true especially in the ministry. A man that is dead in earnest will succeed

anywhere. He may have the poorest talents, but he will make his impression in the world. The history of the world is the history of this truth.

Not that enthusiasm which is all *superficial*, and which consists chiefly in pounding the pulpit very often ; but that real earnestness of soul which shows itself in every tone, and makes you feel that there is intense feeling and meaning beneath every word. When this exists, there will be an earnest delivery. It is better to go to the extreme even of a young Andover student who once was sent down to Cape Ann, among the fishermen, to preach. The criticism they made upon him the next day was that "he lobstered too much." How many, many sermons have been lost by being preached by men who seemed one half asleep. You have the most sacred message in the world to deliver. Make men *feel* it when you stand before them. Break down the barriers by the very intensity of your own convictions. I know it is not the twang of the string, but the arrow, which does the execution. But the arrow will never reach its mark unless there is some snap. Dr. J. W. Alexander was wont to say: "Live *for* your sermon, live *in* your sermon. Get some starling to cry, *Sermon*, sermon, sermon."

7. Many ministers fail, I think, in not making *the points in the sermon* DEFINITE. Whatever else you do, make these clear, sharp, and distinct. I believe this is extremely important. I listened, a few months ago, to an address from a Doctor of Divinity who stands high in his profession. After listening about thirty-five minutes, a clergyman, with whom I had a little acquaintance, sitting near, touched my shoulder and said: "Do you know what he is talking about?" Another person near by said: "That was just my thought." The contrast with the gentleman that followed was great. It may have been noticed that Dr. William Taylor in his sermons seems usually to make just three heads, and I have another very able preacher in mind who told me that he had adopted that rule. They are made so *direct* that every one feels their power. Do not make as many as a man to whom I once listened. He had five or six grand divisions, and each of these divided into ten or a dozen more. A friend of mine kept account till he got up to thirty or forty, and then gave it up in despair. You may preach that kind in your *ministerial associations*. Give us in the pews about three points, clear and distinct. It is all we can

hold. You see to-day I am talking to ministers, and not to laymen, and so I do not feel it to be necessary to take my own prescription!

8. Many ministers fail by neglecting to use simple *illustrations* of the truth from daily life. It was Christ's method to speak in parable from the common things which He saw about Him; the sower, mustard seed, the vine, etc. You can always arrest the attention of the audience. They understand the truth through the illustration, and remembering the illustration, they forever remember the truth it teaches. The truth alone might have been forgotten in an hour; united with the incident, it will linger in the memory. I remember an incident which once fell under my observation. I was asked to make an address, in a time of religious interest. For the sake of reaching business men, I chose one of the commonest things, which they see every day, to illustrate the life beyond. In the audience there was a young man of twenty-five, of great intelligence, trained in a Christian home, and a regular attendant, all his life, upon the preaching of the gospel. That illustration gave the gentleman a new view of the truth which he had never realized before, although he had probably heard it in the



abstract a hundred times. That night he became a Christian. It is another of the secrets of Moody's hold upon the masses, that he enforces the Bible truth by such plain and homely illustrations. The minister who is deficient in this regard is depriving himself of one of the best methods of getting the truth *so that it will stay*, into a man's heart.

Of course, illustrations should not be overdone, and they should be true to the facts. Be careful and not make the mistake of the Irishman who, in his eloquence, said: "Our religion is like a ship at sea: it is founded on a rock." I suppose it is hardly necessary to suggest such an incident in this presence, although I did hear something almost as absurd from a minister near at hand.

Within a few days I saw a new illustration of this truth. There had been a good prayer-meeting, devout, thoughtful. Unfortunately, the last speaker unfolded a truth in not the best way. The effect of the meeting was greatly injured, and he sat down just as the hour closed. The pastor quickly rose, took that brother's thought, and by the means of one or two *simple illustrations*, lifted it up so that it could be seen in its beauty. You could feel the thrill almost go through the audience. It did not

take two minutes, but it made just the difference between *partial failure* and *great success* in its effect.

9. I think there is a failure in the ministry of many because they do not have *special classes for training the young*. A pastor's class of half an hour right after school, once a week, for the little children, and another for the older ones in the evening, ought to be in every plan of parish work. You *can* reach the children, and put in the truth, which will lie *underneath everything else*, and will be sure to be remembered in after life, even if it does get covered up for a time. The pastor who allows any one else to do this service is neglecting his best opportunity to save souls. And in the same line, more time should be spent in the instruction of new converts. It can be done in these classes. When Paul, in his first missionary tour, with all the world open to receive the gospel, stopped, and went back to strengthen the churches and confirm the work already done, he left an example for us. It was the most *economical* use he could make of his time. More *permanent* results would be seen in the coming years.

10. Many ministers fail to accomplish all they

might by neglecting to *explain the Scriptures* in the ordinary reading of them. The usual method is to read through a chapter and say nothing. If you would more often read one half a chapter, or less, and explain, it would be a mighty power for good. There are shades of meaning in the original which you know and can give us, which will be wonderfully helpful. And every time in the future, when we come to that passage, it will have a new meaning. I know one minister who always does this, and it is one of the best parts of the service.

A very intelligent lady said to me, not long since : "I like to go to Mr. ——'s evening service, to hear his exposition of the Scriptures." Would it not be wise often to have this a part of the morning as well as evening service? This grows out of the first point I made, namely, that you overrate us. In proof of this, some months ago I made this test : The clergyman who preached, reading a chapter from the Old Testament, made several explanations which were new to me. The whole passage had an entirely new meaning. As I had an opportunity the next few days, I asked some of the most intelligent people in the congregation, and found they had been as much edified and enlightened as I had.

There was one man in the church, well educated, a great student, especially of the Bible, and I feared to ask him, thinking he might have known these facts before; but I thought I would be fair, so I asked. He made the same confession. You say we ought to know more. Doubtless. But be charitable. You study this book every day of every week, by the hour. When shall we do it? From morning till evening we are wrestling with the practical questions of life. Will you say, after work is done? How many evenings in the week do you have to study, with all the religious appointments of life? Hardly one, and we have no more, and our Sunday-school lesson takes all of that. Well, Sabbath day. We attend three services; we are not loyal, we are told, if we do not read the "Missionary Herald" and the "Home Missionary"; we should be "dropped from the roll" if we did not read the "Congregationalist," or the "Advance," or the "Christian Union." There is but little time left.

No, you must give us the results of your study, if we are ever to understand fully God's word. It is the Bible we need, and all need. When a man is anxious for his soul, he cares little for your words compared with the message from above. Point him

to the truth, let him read it for himself, and he will believe. I shall never forget the face of one man seeking for light, as I read to him from God's word a passage for his help. I watched his face as he turned to the Book itself, as if to be sure it was really there. *Preach Christ and not the Schools.*

It has been well said that if you want to cut one hundred sticks six feet long, in the forest, before you have cut twenty of them you will find a variation of two or three inches, if you take the last one each time as a pattern. More Bible, more Bible, explained so that we shall know its deepest meaning, is one of the needs of the hour.

And will you allow me, at this point, to allude to another matter which is often spoken in the pews? Why make the "long prayer" so very long? If so many things must be remembered every Sabbath, would it not be better to divide the petition? Prayers of fifteen or twenty minutes fail in their object *to lead the congregation.* Sitting recently in an audience-room where the clock was before me, I found the prayer to be twenty-two minutes long. It may be noted in this connection that the prayers of the *Scriptures* are short. If there was ever a time when a long prayer might seem to be fitting, it



was when the wise king was to offer it, and the occasion the dedication of the temple. I took occasion, last week, to read this petition slowly, and it took three and one-half minutes. Does any one say this is not the whole prayer? In 1st Kings, viii, 54, you find these words: "And when Solomon had made an end of praying all this prayer." Does not this seem to imply that the whole petition, in its beauty and power, has been recorded for us?

11. One of the needs of the ministry is to more constantly press home the truth as something to be accepted *now*. I have a friend who does not like to make social calls very well, who said: "I like to have a person say 'Come and see me some time, for that means no time.'" So with the invitations from the pulpit in the name of Christ. Are they not often too general, too indefinite? Is there not an impression left that no especial haste is required *now*? And is this not another reason of the success of some men and the failure of others in winning men? Whoever listened to Moody or Bliss without realizing the truth that some action at once was necessary on the part of the sinner? That delay was awful sin; that "now" and "now only, is the accepted time." That "*to-day*" is the time to heed His voice.

You ask, shall we always do this? It is very well for an evangelist, or a stranger, whom you expect to hear seldom. But does it not honor the gospel, and the great Giver who offers it, to expect its acceptance promptly? You have no right to preach any other gospel. In business we expect decision of questions to be made speedily. Is there any business so important as this, and can you not make this appeal oftener than you do? Press the point that it is manly and womanly to act; offer to wait, at the close of the service, in the church parlor or vestry, to talk with any; appoint evenings for conversation; do those things which shall show that you *expect* people to act promptly? The very constancy of this course will have a tendency to arouse people from their lethargy and break the force of the devil's greatest temptation, the one that has lost more souls than all others combined, namely, that "there is time enough yet."

12. I do not feel it to be necessary, in this presence, and yet this paper would be incomplete if I did not say that the need of the hour is for *more ministers who are more Christlike*. We need leaders who shall be head and shoulders above the people. Two generations ago there was the

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greatest reverence for the minister on account of his *calling*, and one would hardly sit in his presence. That day is passed, but there is a similar reverence, deep underneath, for some of you: not because of your *office*, but for what *you are*. You need to feel more and more that to hold still more firmly by this leadership you must be still more like Christ. The *office* alone will not give you the power. When you preach, never forget that your words will go no farther than *your own lives carry it*. Back of the preacher will be the MAN; and what he *is*, and not what he *professes*, will always determine the force and power of the message.

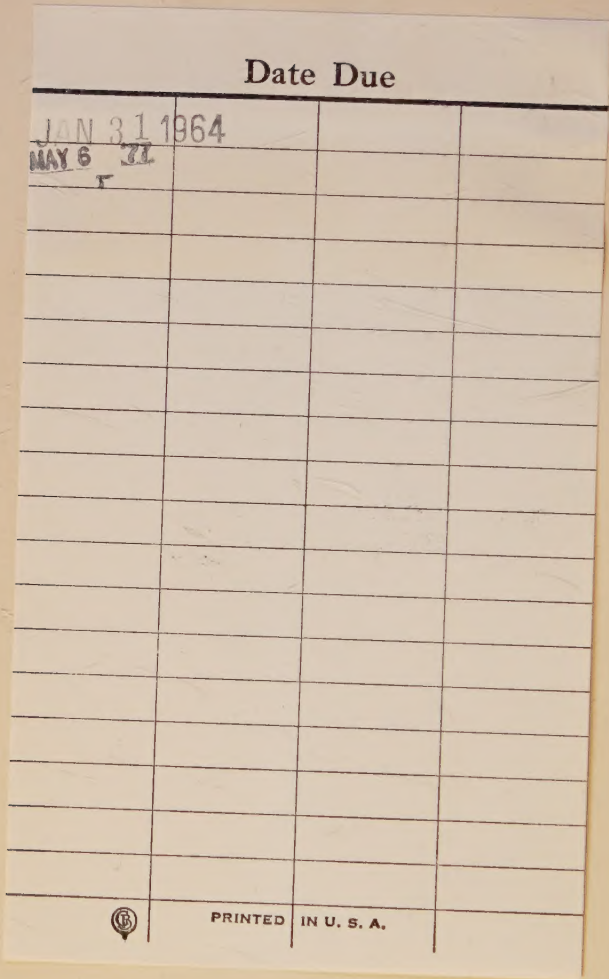
When walking hastily past a group a short time since, I heard religious truth spoken of rather lightly, and when I turned to see the speaker, my eye rested upon a well-known clergyman. I should not care to hear him preach. You need, what laymen certainly do, more of the power of the Holy Spirit to accompany your words. The fountain can never be higher than its source: your word will never be higher than your life. No man, even if he is a minister, has any more religion than he has in daily use.

Brethren, these twelve suggestions I make, one

for each of the twelve tribes of Israel. I am sure you will pardon my frankness, receiving them in the spirit in which I have tried to speak: humbly, kindly, generously. If any truth has been spoken, I know you will easily detect it; as for the errors, you will detect them also, and no harm will be done.





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